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Abstract

This chapter explores the controversial history of the Divine Mercy devotion, including the highly charged and affective spiritual scripts surrounding the mystic visionary who established the cult, Saint Faustina. It analyses the lived religious experiences of a number of devotees, mapping the visual and material practices associated with these new prayers and rituals, as well as exploring parallels with the well-established seventeenth century devotion of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Through close attention to the spiritual narratives of men and women who have developed an intense relationship with the Divine Mercy, this chapter elucidates the embodied and gendered intercessory strategies employed within an important strand of contemporary Catholic spirituality worldwide.

Keywords: Divine Mercy; Saint Faustina; Sacred Heart of Jesus; mysticism; spirituality; masculinity; embodiment.

‘For those with hardened hearts’: Female Mysticism, Masculine Piety and the Divine Mercy Devotion

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‘Discovering that the Lord is so “frantically”, endlessly in love with His creatures caused my reformation’, wrote Franciszek from Warsaw in the late 1990s within a letter of thanksgiving to the Shrine of the Divine Mercy in the Krakówian suburb of Łagiewniki. He continued: ‘My life was at the point where for several dozen years I had neglected the Sacrament of Atonement and my marriage had begun to fall apart ... It’s hard to express in these few sentences how God’s mercy changed my life and the life of those closest to me. Thanks to Sister Faustina and her intercession through prayer, *I became a new man*. I wish to give thanks in public to Our Lord Jesus and His blessed Apostle, for the grace of faith, for my family, for an exceptional wife and our three good and wise children, for work ... and for all the gifts that the Lord blesses us with every day’ (Sąsiasdek 2007, 21).

The Apostle to whom Franciszek referred was the Polish nun, Sister Maria Faustina Kowalska who in 1931 had the first of many visions of Christ. Appearing as the Divine Mercy, with two rays radiating from His heart, the vision instructed Faustina to have a devotional image painted and to inaugurate a variety of devotional practices, allied to the rosary and centred on commemoration of Christ's Passion and His remission of sins. Along the lines of the institution of devotion to the Miraculous Medal of the Virgin communicated through a vision in the nineteenth century to the French nun Saint Cathérine Labouré in 1830 (Burton 2001), Faustina believed herself to be instructed by Christ to materialise and popularise the Christ that appeared to her: 'By means of this Image I shall be granting many graces to souls; so let every soul have access to it' (Kowalska 2007, §570, 242, hereafter *Diary*).

This chapter explores the controversial history and contemporary practice of this immensely popular but little studied devotion, encompassing the ways in which gendered spiritual scripts framed the (now canonised) Saint Faustina's highly charged, affective relationship to Christ. It will also analyse the lived religious experiences and discursive subjectivities of a number of devotees, mapping the visual and material practices associated with these prayers, centred around a metaphorical and visceral relationship with the Merciful Heart of Jesus which parallels, but also extends upon, the well-established seventeenth century devotion of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (Jones 2000, Morgan 2008). Through close attention to the spiritual narratives of men and women who have developed an intense relationship with the Divine Mercy, this chapter elucidates the embodied intercessory strategies employed within an important strand of contemporary Catholic spirituality worldwide. Particular attention is paid to the ways in which this malleable form of prayer has

been mobilised to address the needs of a ‘manly’, family-orientated piety under the broader auspices of a desire for healing and a holistic solution to suffering and self-integration. In its historical form and present-day practice, this extra-liturgical devotional reveals a fascinating spectrum of representations and rhetorics about femininity, masculinity and ‘divinely-inflected’ gender categories.

1. The Making of a Saint: from Helena Kowalska to Saint Faustina

Helena Kowalska was born on 25 August 1905 in Głogowiec, Poland, within the Russian Empire. Hagiographical biographies describe the poverty of her rural background, her devout parents and, ‘from her earliest childhood, her deep and unaffected piety and love of God in the Blessed Sacrament’ (Hargest-Gorzela 2000, 7). Conforming to the prototype of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Marian visionaries, often from peasant stock and poorly-educated (e.g. Lourdes, Fatima, Medjugorje) (Zimdars-Swartz 1991), recent biographers stress the truncated nature of Faustina’s education, her child-like trust in Christ, and the mercantile opposition of her parents to her desire to enter religious life from a young age. From the age of 16 she went into service but was prompted to seek admission to a convent by a vision of the suffering, naked Christ (while herself dancing with a young man) who communicated His frustration at her procrastination and commanded her to go to Warsaw (Witko 2000, 10). Refused by a number of orders for want of financial resources, the Congregation of the Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy agreed to take her if she amassed some monies before entry, and she worked for various families before entering the convent in 1925 and taking the name in religion of Maria Faustina. Throughout her short lifetime as a female religious, she worked as a cook and baker, cleaner and gardener within convents in Warsaw, Kraków, Płock and Vilnius, and

experienced frequent visions and mystical encounters with Christ. In marked parallel with another twentieth-century female religious, Thérèse of Lisieux (Harris 2013), who indeed was an inspiration and prayer confessor for the saint (Sąsiasdek 2007, 73), Faustina also recorded the intricacies of her spiritual life in a diary, and similarly died of a protracted battle with tuberculosis at the young age of thirty-three, on 5 October 1938, in Kraków where she was buried.

The diary, first published (in an approved version in 1987) as *Divine Mercy in My Soul*, presents an intimate insight into Faustina's interior life and her life's vocation as 'secretary of My mercy' – a title she has Jesus repeatedly apply to her in the many visions she relates (*Diary*, §1605, 570). Advised in 1933 by her first spiritual confessor and academic theologian, Father Michał Sopoćko, to keep a record of her conversations with and messages from Jesus, the six surviving notebooks range across chronologies, encompassing her early life and first vision, a reconstruction of her writings between 1933–4 (as she was persuaded to burn this first notebook by an 'imaginary angel') (Witko 2000, 24) and contemporaneous experiences. Fraught with interpretative challenges, especially in relation to the role of her confessors (and posthumous promoters) in framing her narratives (much like Saint Marguerite Marie Alacoque's relationship to Saint Claude de la Colombière in the promotion of the Sacred Heart, or the redaction of Thérèse of Lisieux's *Story of a Soul* by her sister and religious superior), the text nonetheless stands as a key reference-point for the construction (and application) of the devotion, as will be explored. Foremost amongst these accounts of her extraordinary visions and communications is that on 22 February 1931 when she was praying in her cell at the convent at Plock. She recorded that she saw:

the Lord Jesus clothed in a white garment. One hand [was] raised in the gesture of blessing, the other was touching the garment at the breast. From beneath the garment, slightly drawn aside at the breast, there were emanating two large rays, one red, the other pale. In silence I kept my gaze fixed on the Lord ... (*Diary* §47, 24).

She then noted:

Jesus said to me ‘Paint an image according to the pattern you see, with the signature: “Jesus, I trust in You”. I desire that this image be venerated, first in your chapel, and [then] throughout the world.

I promise that the soul that will venerate this image will not perish’ ... (*Diary* §47–8, 24).

From this time onwards, all Faustina’s subsequent visions reinforced and refined this representation of Jesus as the Divine Mercy, and I have written elsewhere about the artistic complexities and clerical sensitivities involved in materialising these visions (Garnett and Harris 2013a) – culminating in the eventual dominance of a 1943 votive picture produced by Adolf Hyla and housed in the Łagiewniki convent chapel (Tarnawska 1993) (Figure 1). In Faustina’s time, the devotion also developed beyond the image to include, from a vision on 13 September 1935, a form of set prayers – a Divine Mercy chaplet and a Novena to be prayed on rosary beads to ‘appease his wrath’, especially at the time of death (*Diary* §687, 282). The institution of the Divine Mercy Hour (observed at 3 o’clock to commemorate the time of Christ’s death) was instructed in two subsequent visions in October 1937 and January 1938 (*Diary* §1572, 558).

During her time at the Vilnius convent between 1933 and 1936 and under the spiritual direction of Father Sopoćko, Faustina predicted that the promotion of the Divine Mercy would be suppressed. Writing in her diary on 8 February 1935, she informed her confessor:

There will come a time when this work, which God is demanding so very much, will be as though utterly undone. And then God will act with great power, which will give evidence of its authenticity. It will be a new splendour for the Church, although it has been dormant in it from long ago (*Diary* §378, 171).

This proved to be correct, although there was immediate growth in the devotion after the ‘terrible war’ (of which Faustina spoke) (Odell 1998, 153–60), through the foundation of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Divine Mercy, established by Father Sopoćko¹ and public access to the Divine Mercy image in the Kraków chapel during World War II as sanctioned by Archbishop Jalbrzykowski. Nevertheless, in 1959 Cardinal Ottaviani moved to have Faustina’s *Diary* placed on the ‘Index of Forbidden Books’ and there it remained until Pope Paul VI abolished the Index itself in 1966. The Divine Mercy devotion was therefore officially banned within the Catholic Church from 1959 to 1978. Concerns were expressed about inaccurate versions of the *Diary* circulating and being translated into French and Italian, and there was clearly a more general anxiety in the Vatican about how to maintain control over its interpretation. A rehabilitation process was opened in 1965 by the then Archbishop of Kraków, Karol Józef Wojtyła, later Pope John Paul II, who compiled a dossier on Faustina and requested the instigation of the beatification process in 1968 (which concluded in 1993). The influence of John Paul II on the rapid legitimization of the devotion – and its incorporation into a longer standing, mythologized vision of

Kraków as a site of spiritual power – is not to be underestimated (Niedźwiedź 2009; cf Stackpole 2008). Yet popular devotion to the Divine Mercy also flourished in Poland under wartime conditions and post-World War II communism (Zaremba [1957]), and indeed spread with Polish migration to France, the United States (Michalenko 1987, 251), Australia and indeed Britain (Hargest-Gorzelak 2000, 242). Worship of the Divine Mercy now encompasses most countries throughout the world and in 2002 a massive basilica and shrine complex was built at Łagiewniki, in the tradition of ‘charismatic spatialization’ (Eade and Sallnow 2000, 8) in the grounds of the Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy convent. It was consecrated by Pope John Paul II (Bujak 2012) and since 2005 around two million pilgrims visit annually – about half are Polish devotees, but the remainder come from over 80 different countries and are supported by more than 14,000 chaplains (in 2011).² These numbers are sure to increase in the coming years, bolstered by the canonisation of Pope John Paul II on Divine Mercy Sunday in 2014³ and the announcement that the next World Youth Day in July 2016 will be held in Kraków.

2. A Heart Enflamed and Transplanted: Female Mysticism and the Divine Mercy

Writing in 1938 in her *Diary* about her spiritual preparations for reception of Holy Communion, Sister Faustina made the following personal address to Christ:

Today, I am preparing myself for Your coming as a bride does for the coming of her bridegroom. ... Our hearts are constantly united. ... The presence of God penetrates me and sets aflame my love for Him. There are no words; there is only interior understanding. I drown completely in God, through love. ... I invite Jesus into my heart, as Love. You are Love itself. All heaven catches the flame from You and is filled with love. And so my soul covets You as a

flower yearns for the sun. Jesus, hasten to my heart, for You see that, as the flower is eager for the sun, so my heart is for You. I open the calyx of my heart to receive Your Love.

When Jesus came to my heart, everything in my soul trembled with life and with warmth. Jesus, take the love from my heart and pour it into Your love, Your love which is burning and radiant, which knows how to bear each sacrifice, which knows how to forget itself completely (*Diary* §1805-1809, 638–9).

These highly charged, eroticised, almost orgasmic expressions of yearning for mystical union and descriptions of the experience of spiritual ecstasy should be placed in context of a long history within the Western Christian tradition of female religious framing their relationship with God (and Christ) in terms of marriage, maternity, and the language of the Song of Songs (Walker Bynum 1986, 260–2 and Machniak 2001, 83-9). Women like Hildegard of Bingen, Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila (epitomised in Bernini's 'Ecstasy' in St Peter's Basilica) or indeed Marguerite Marie Alacoque in her descriptions of the Sacred Heart, used a similar rhetorical register. Faustina's embodied experiences of 'revelations, visions, hidden stigmata, [the] experience of the Lord's Passion, the gift of bi-location, reading human souls, prophecies [and] the rare gift of mystical ... wedding' (Siepak 2001, 59) therefore place this newly canonised saint with a distinctive, but highly developed strand of (gendered) spirituality within the Catholic church.

Yet the situation of Saint Faustina within this legitimising legacy of distinguished writers of the spiritual life (Coleman and Elser 1995, 133), which theologians and clerics have felt empowered to do following her rehabilitation and canonization, underestimates the potency of Faustina's claims then (and now) to unmediated access to the divine and the interdependence, indeed interpenetration,

between herself and Christ. The symbol of the heart, understood as metaphor but also a viscerally envisioned actuality, is at the centre of these written meditations:

My Jesus, penetrate me through and through so that I might be able to reflect You in my whole life. Divinize me so that my deeds may have supernatural value. ...I desire to reflect Your compassionate heart, full of mercy; I want to glorify it. Let Your mercy, Oh Jesus, be impressed upon my heart and my soul as a seal ... (*Diary* §1242, 449).

For Faustina, this modeling of Divine Mercy required the conformance of her heart to the heart of Christ, as when she was commanded in a vision:

The Heart of My beloved must resemble Mine; from her heart must spring the fountain of My mercy for souls (*Diary* §1148, 421)

Often the language of the *Diary* moves from mimesis or replication to divinization, (re) incarnation, penetration or transplantation, as when she writes:

My spirit is with God, my veins are filled with God, so I do not look for Him outside myself. He, the Lord, penetrates my soul just as a ray from the sun penetrates clear glass. When I was enclosed in my mother's womb, I was not so closely united with her as I am with my God. There, it was unawareness; but here, it is the fullness of reality and the consciousness of union (*Diary* §883, 346).

As Caroline Walker Bynum has reflected of women's devotional writing in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, 'female erotic experience, childbirth and marriage became major metaphors for spiritual advancement, for service of neighbor and for union with the divine' (Walker Bynum 1986, 275 and 1982, 135–46). These resonances in metaphorical medium and spiritual expression across the centuries are

striking, but also belie subtle changes when contextualized in a twentieth-century, interwar European setting. Faustina also often speaks of Jesus as ‘my Mother’ (*Diary* §230, 115; §239, 119; §249, 123; §264, 128; §298, 138; §505, 218), and repeatedly describes Christ as an emotionally sensitive and tender lover with whom full union is possible. Through these spiritual maneuvers, she thereby (re)asserted the legitimacy of the female body as an appropriate site for the experience (and emulation) of the divine in an accessible register and a modern setting. Yet in the context of an ultramontane, highly-centralized Catholic Church in which visions were treated with heightened scrutiny and suspicion (e.g. Harris 1999), Faustina’s articulated desire that Christ should ‘divinize’ her was an audacious claim to female sanctity which implicitly bypassed adjudicating canonization processes. Indeed in the suppression of the devotion between 1959 and 1979, Bishop Paweł Socha asserted that the concern of the Holy Office was roused by mistranslations of the *Diary* – in part because of concerns about a misplaced nationalism in which the colour of the rays were taken to represent the Polish flag, but also because ‘the Polish re-typed text contained many mistakes suggesting that Sister Faustina required the worship of her own heart’ (Socha 2001, 126). Such an interpretation would, of course stray into heterodoxy – although in the popular practice of the cult of the saints across the centuries, such fine dogmatic distinctions do tend to blur. Nevertheless, it seems clear that the shocking immediacy and erotically charged nature of Faustina’s claims to communion with Jesus, which in a modern context could be circulated and apprehended by a global audience, were a key reason for profound institutional and (male) clerical discomfort.

Moreover, Faustina’s devotion to the (Merciful) Heart of Jesus needs to be situated against earlier devotions to Christ’s sacred humanity and the codification of these spiritual traditions in the cult of the Sacred Heart of Jesus based upon the

visions to the Visitandine religious, Saint Mary Margaret Alacoque (1647–90). Despite its widespread popularity with the laity (and particularly female religious) throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth century, devotion to the Sacred Heart (codified in mass produced *San Sulpice* statues of Jesus with pierced heart exposed) only obtained universal legitimacy when it was added to the Roman Catholic liturgical calendar in 1856. This papal imprimatur was reinforced by Pope Leo XIII's consecration of the entire human race to the Sacred Heart of Jesus in his Encyclical *Annum Sacrum* (1899). A highly influential encouragement and reiterated endorsement within Faustina's own lifetime was the canonization of Sister Margaret Mary Alacoque in 1920, and an extended consideration of her visions within Pope Pius XI's 1928 encyclical *Miserentissimus Redemptor*, which centred on the need for acts of reparation and atonement (see Morgan 2008, 29–38). Faustina's visions are clearly influenced by and extend upon this established imagery and the ubiquitous associated metaphors surrounding the (sacred) heart (Morgan 1998 and 2012). Using anatomical language such as calyx and veins, her *Diary* augments the metaphor of the Divine Heart to encompass devotion to the Divine Blood as another site of meditation and mediation. In a striking (and symptomatic) reflection, Faustina wrote:

All my virginal love is drowned eternally in You, O Jesus! I sense keenly how Your Divine Blood is circulating in my heart; I have not the least doubt that Your most pure love has entered my heart with Your most sacred Blood (*Diary* §478, 208).

In an earlier vision, Faustina recorded Jesus as saying 'You are a sweet grape in a chosen cluster; I want others to have a share in the juice that is flowing within you' (*Diary* §393, 176) and in this Eucharistic vein, Faustina recalls an interior plea (when receiving Holy Communion) "Jesus, transform me into another host! I want to be a living host for You", endorsed by the response of Christ "You are a living host,

pleasing to the Heavenly Father' (*Diary* §1826, 643). In ostensible usurpation of the prerogative of the priest – given that touching the physical host was prohibited in the preconciliar church – Faustina records in her notebooks repeated instances of the host coming to 'rest in her hand' (e.g. *Diary* §44, 23). These occurrences were explicitly linked to acts of reparation (on behalf of her religious community, or the universal church) and are presented as reinforcing Faustina's mystical but also physical, embodied union with Christ. The real presence of Christ in the host is reinforced by the inner voice Faustina hears on another of these occasions: 'I heard these words from the Host: "I desired to rest in your hands, not only in your heart."' (*Diary* §160, 89). In these accounts, Faustina's physical person, and her hands in particular, act as a tabernacle and even an embodied conduit of the 'real presence'. Narrated within a contemporary setting, rather than the comfortably distant context of a medieval convent, it is clear that these writings which asserted the sanctity of (Faustina's) female body and suggested the immediacy and accessibility of the sacred power outside clerical, sacerdotal structures were deeply destabilizing of a hierarchical, gendered orthodoxy and a modernist mindset. Perhaps Pope Pius XII had some of these misgivings in mind, as well as longer-term anxieties about the feminization of religion (which are discussed in the Introduction to this volume), when he reaffirmed the relevance, rationality and authenticity of devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus in his 1957 Encyclical *Haurietis Aquas*. Addressing charges of 'sentimentalism' and that the devotion was 'ill-adapted, not to say detrimental, to the more pressing spiritual needs of the Church and humanity in this present age',⁴ he dismissed those who, amongst other complaints, viewed it as 'a type of piety nourished not by the soul and mind but by the senses and consequently more suited to the use of women, since it seems to them something not quite suitable for educated men'.⁵ Practices such as the

formation of confraternities of the Sacred Heart for laymen, or the promotion of the ‘enthronement of the image of the Sacred Heart’ in Catholic houses (to be installed by the male head of the household and blessed by the parish priest) were designed to address these mid-twentieth century concerns by inscribing a domesticated male piety while reinforcing the centrality of institutional, clerically-auspiced religiosity (see also Harris 2013b, 69-75; Van Osselaer 2012, 121–36). The next section examines the ways in which prayer to the Divine Mercy has syncretically annexed components of the Sacred Heart legacy – in particular its use in the sanctification of suffering (Burton 2004; Orsi 2005) – but also has been interpreted as a new, more vibrant devotional practice tailored to contemporaneous needs by drawing upon the metaphorical potentialities and visceral, intensely incarnational cast of Faustina’s *Diary*. Informed by Caroline Walker Bynum’s theoretical insights that ‘gender symbols ... may be experienced differently by the different genders’ (Walker Bynum 1986, 13), it explores the ways in which Divine Mercy imagery simultaneously inverts, rejects but also reinforces the gender values and structures of twenty-first century Europe. Yet it is also important, as Meredith McGuire has observed, to ‘eschew dichotomous thinking about expectations for “male” and “female” in order to understand better [the ways in which] ritual and spiritual practices [are] both meaningful and powerful’ (McGuire 2008, 168). My preoccupation is therefore a description of the lived, everyday experiences of devotees (McGuire 2008, 12–15; Ammerman 2006; Orsi 2012) – including some male clients for whom this new devotion is a particularly apt vehicle for the construction of a conversion narrative, centred around family values and redefined notions of fatherhood, thereby affirming an affective but ‘manly’ religiosity.

3. **‘We all make up one organism in Jesus’: Lived Religious Experiences of the Divine Mercy**

Describing in the *Diary* the first public adoration of the (Kazimierowski) Divine Mercy image at Ostra Brama on 26 April 1935, Faustina recorded:

When [Father Sopoćko] began to speak about the great mercy of the Lord, the image came alive and the rays pierced the hearts of the people gathered there ...(*Diary* §417, 185).

In Faustina’s mystical vision, the immediacy of the divine communion that she had experienced continually throughout her life was readily available to others through the image of the Divine Mercy. It confirmed her simple conviction in the theological concept of *Corpus Christi* or, as she put it, that ‘we all make up one organism in Jesus’ (*Diary* §1364, 488). In the development and spread of the cult of the Divine Mercy, ordinary laymen and women (as well as some clergy and religious) have used Saint Faustina’s life story and writings to provide a personalised repertoire for the cultivation of their own relationships with Christ. Consciously (and unconsciously), they have drawn inspiration from the *Diary* to describe, to internalise and sometimes to emulate in embodied terms, a personal commitment to these devotional practices. Drawing upon the published spiritual reflections of men and women who have developed an intense relationship with the Merciful Jesus, as well my own oral history interviews with devotees in Britain and at the shrine in Kraków, this section examines the embodied intercessory strategies available within this influential strand of contemporary Catholic spirituality – now believed to be followed by an estimated 100,000 million Catholics worldwide (Groeschel 2010).

This chapter opened with the testimony of Franciszek from Warsaw, who wrote about his ‘reformation’ and the process of becoming ‘a new man’ through immersion in the biography of Faustina and the augmentation of the ‘Sunday piousness’ of his childhood into a mature engagement with Christ and His Apostle. Implicit within his extended testimony are subtle references to the causes of an estrangement over his adult years, such as his introduction to the *Diary* through a ‘party official turned Catholic’ (which made him resistant to a close reading) and the period of ‘martial law’ throughout post-war Poland, remembering Warsaw’s utter devastation after the 1944 Uprising and the restrictions on religious life in the decades of Soviet rule. His reference to the ‘frantic’ love of the Lord for his creatures echoes language used by Faustina herself, and to an immediacy of recent spiritual experience which underpins his own devotion. Most telling, however, are the gendered dimensions of Franciszek’s ‘reformation’, which has enabled him to better value his marital relationship and perform his familial roles as husband and father. The forgiveness and mercy foregrounded in his account, with its stress on penance and atonement, hint at some of the processes arrested by his discovery of the devotion and its address of the causes leading his ‘marriage ... to fall apart’. Much like the Evangelical ‘Promise Keepers’ movement that McGuire has considered in an American context (McGuire 2008, 175–8), for Franciszek the Divine Mercy devotion offers resources for a remaking of himself as head of the family and as a morally and sexually self-disciplined breadwinner.

The appeal of a receptive, compassionate but strong Christ is also present in the testimony of Frédéric, a French Olympic sportsman who spoke in 2012 at a Divine Mercy International Congress about his conversion more than a decade earlier.

Recounting the ways in which Saint Faustina's *Diary* fascinated him and left him 'spellbound', he went on to relate:

We venerate the face of Jesus in the image. The Lord said 'I am meek and humble in heart'. Christ, my dear God, I can see that you are telling the truth, I have never seen such a face (Buttiger 2012, 7).

Speaking under a copy of the Hyla image in the Łagiewnik Basilica, for Frédéric it is the face of the Merciful Jesus, linked to 'meekness', 'humility' and simplicity, which had prompted a *facial recognition*, or a personal appreciation, of Christ's humanity and his divinity. Impelled by the power of this experience to evangelise and express his faith in collective prayer practices, Frédéric joined the *Faustinum*. This international organisation, with branches throughout the world, is a form of sodality to the Divine Mercy that started in 1996. Members are trained over four years for their 'apostolic role' through meetings, religious retreats, and various catechetical publications. As the Confraternities of the Sacred Heart were conceived in slightly militaristic terms as the 'crack troops' addressing 'paganism' and materialism (Van Osselaer 2012) so too does the *Faustinum* offer a virile form of apostolization for the committed elite. As part of his own efforts to promote the Divine Mercy, Frédéric gives classes to prisoners on the *Diary*, the Chaplet and the Hour of Mercy, seeking to reach (and pray) 'for those men with hardened hearts' (Buttiger 2012, 8). In his reference to 'hardened hearts', Frédéric has internalised not only elements of Saint Faustina's language, but also the message of John Paul II's homily delivered at the Saint's canonisation mass on 30 April 2000. Within it, the Pontiff called for a re-appreciation of the 'resurrected Christ who shows us His wounds after crucifixion' and 'heals the wounds of the heart, pulls down the walls that separate us from God

and one another, and allows us again to enjoy the love of the Father and the feeling of fraternal unity' (Jackowski 2001, 22).

Another central, reiterated message within Faustina's visions of the Merciful Jesus was her instruction to:

Tell sinners that I am always waiting for them, that I listen intently to the beating of their heart ... [and ask] when will it beat for Me? Write, that I am speaking to them through their remorse of conscience, through their failures and sufferings, through thunderstorms, through the voice of the Church (*Diary* §1728, 610).

As John Paul II interpreted this imperative, this is a 'comforting message [addressed] to people who live in anguish because of some particularly painful experience or who yield under the burden of their committed sins' for 'the mild face of Christ reveals itself to such people and the beams coming out of His Heart descend on them, enlighten and animate them, point them on the way and fill them with hope' (Jackowski 2001, 24). In a liturgy celebrating the tenth anniversary of the Łagiewnik Sanctuary in June 2012, Polish radio DJ Jan Polkowski shared with the thousands of worshippers gathered his own story of the comfort offered by the Divine Mercy chaplet in times of intense grief and suffering. In 1999, while on a summer family holiday, Jan and his four-year-old son decided to take a boat trip on the lake. As he recounted it, there was a mechanical malfunction with the outboard engine, and the boat exploded, seriously injuring him and killing his young son. After some days in hospital under sedation, he awoke to the full reality of his injuries but, more painfully, his sense of guilt, bereavement and failed parental responsibility. In the days that followed, the visiting hospital chaplain would say the Divine Mercy chaplet by his bedside, and in the repetition of the words 'for the sake of His sorrowful Passion,

have mercy on us and on the whole world' (which is repeated on ten rosary beads, and in five sets across the rosary as a whole), Jan eventually found words of consolation, forgiveness and, in the years following, a way through.⁶ As the testimonies of Franciszek, Frédéric and Jan all illustrate, their practice of the Divine Mercy devotion has enabled a personal encounter with a tender and merciful Christ, leading to self-transformation and a reorientation of their lives. Acknowledging their own vulnerability, but also the possibility of reclaiming 'manly authority' within a domestic setting or through counter-cultural witness in unreceptive public places, for these men an open, "unhardened", receptive heart on the model of Christ has enabled catharsis and ministry (through acts of mercy) to the pain and brokenness of others.

At the heart of the message of the Divine Mercy lies the concept of healing – understood in spiritual, moral and corporeal terms and in tune with contemporaneous spiritual yearnings, across religious traditions, for a holistic approach to health and well-being (McGuire 2008, 119–29; Harris 2013c). An attitude of trust in God's mercy and the immanence of His grace, reinforced by prayer, are believed to be the basis of such transformation. The explicit mapping of the devotee's life on the ministry and passion of Christ is believed to provide an exemplary path for good living and a confidence when faced with pain, guilt and ultimately death. Just as the initial stages of the twentieth-century devotional cult to Saint St Thérèse of Lisieux were forged on the fields of Flanders (Harris 2013b, 217ff), an initial stimulus to the worldwide promotion of the Divine Mercy devotion was its use by Polish soldiers (and civilians) in the Second World War. Combatants found in Sister Faustina's written fears for her homeland, and in the prayers she established, a way of coping with feelings of helplessness and the constant presence of suffering, destruction and death. For example, a battered Divine Mercy prayer card displayed in the Warsaw Uprising

Museum in the Polish capital and sent from a mother to her son held in a concentration camp in 1941, is striking visual testament to the faith and familial (as well as spiritual) consolation offered by the devotion. Similarly, an image of the Divine Mercy held at the Marian Fathers Centre for the Apostolate in West Ealing, London is surrounded by *ex votos* that give material testament to these early stages of the cult's foundation. War medals (on ribbons with the red and white colours of the Polish flag), as well as precious jewellery, bear material witness to male and female devotees' thanksgiving for wartime survival and the provision of refuge from war, and the Soviet regime, in Britain.

As well as these thanksgivings for the avoidance of death, others subjectively interpret their physical and mental healing in creatively embodied and often literal terms. For example, a Filipino woman in London holding down two jobs and burdened by remittances which had led her to seek an unhealthy, addictive escape in gambling, attributes her recovery to a dream of the Merciful Jesus in which the Divine Heart replaced her own.⁷ Frédéric also maps his transformative encounters with Christ in embodied, three-dimensional terms, drawing upon Divine Mercy imagery:

My dear God, let the rays coming from your humble heart touch my heart as well as the hearts of the whole congregation gathered today. I like to hide in their shadows, not only in the sacraments but also in everyday life. I would like to be changed by you ... so that my language becomes merciful, and my feet take me wherever someone needs me (Buttiger 2012, 8).

For both Divine Mercy devotees, their religious practice offers a source of power to address personal distress and, for Frédéric whose conversion experience (like those of many male devotees) has given rise to a zeal for tangible action, a tool to address social disintegration. Within the imagery of the Divine Mercy many others have also

found devotional encouragements to imaginative, mimetic engagement with a fleshy, physically palpable and healing Christ. Moving beyond a Western bio-medically defined model, there is a well-charted and increasing appeal in a re-apprehension of the material and sensory dimensions of contemporary religiosity (Promey 2014). This is also seen in a growing body of literature advocating resort to the Divine Mercy to address cancer (Sobecks 2011) and a holistic blending of religion and healing is expressed within a ‘Prayer for Healing’ used by a Filipino Divine Mercy group in London. This prayer treats devotees’ own (and often female) bodies as potentially iconographic representations or ‘vessels’, analogous to Divine Mercy image:

Jesus, may Your pure and healthy blood circulate in my ailing organism and may Your pure and healthy body transform my weak unhealthy body, and may a healthy and vigorous life flow once again within me, if it is truly Your Holy Will. Amen (Lydia 2012, 7).

This language of the Divine Heart and the Divine Blood echoes, as we have seen, the language used by Saint Faustina herself in her accounts of embodied, prayerful life-giving encounters with the Merciful Jesus. The stress on a profound embodiment and courageous suffering as a means for physical and spiritual union with Christ, echoes the strategies that female mystics have used across the centuries for developing their spiritual life (Walker Bynum 1986, 275).

For some, such as sixty-something Mille from Puerto Rico - with whom the author conversed while undertaking ethnographic fieldwork at the Łagiewnik Sanctuary in September 2012 – their encounter with the Merciful Christ has been directly auspiced by Saint Faustina herself. With tears in her eyes and conviction in her voice, Mille was candid in speaking about a medical condition for which she was hospitalised about ten years ago, with an unequivocal medical diagnosis of imminent

blindness. Lying in the ward, a woman in a nun's habit (who was at that point unknown to her) appeared and told her to have faith and trust in Jesus. Spurred on by this encounter to identify the woman – whom she now acknowledges as Saint Faustina – Mille attributes the retention of a functional proportion of her sight over the last decade, and the management of the pain and fear associated with her condition, to her adoption of the Divine Mercy devotion. With the rapid deterioration of her sight last year, Mille decided to make a pilgrimage to Kraków in thanksgiving for the preceding years of respite, and has enrolled at a school for the blind to acquire skills for the years ahead.⁸ Alongside its encouragement to an imitation of Christ in bearing suffering stoically, the Divine Mercy devotion also offers, in the exemplar of St Faustina, an invitation to emulate the Saint's own resilience and fortitude in facing a protracted and painful terminal illness.

The metaphorical application of the Divine Mercy to the healing of ailing, unhealthy hearts has also led to a particularly prominent application of the devotion within health care and nursing settings, often drawing upon the historical example of Saint Faustina praying by the bedsides of fellow patients while she was in hospital or saying the Divine Mercy chaplet at the bedside of the dying. Martha, a former nun born in the Cameroon who has worked as a nurse in a London hospital since 1994, attests to the importance of the Divine Mercy in her work in palliative care for cancer patients. Attributing her exposure to the devotion to a parish in St Alban's where retired people (with the support of an Irish parish priest) used the church for 3pm prayers, Martha describes the power and utility of the chaplet as holistic. It aids her physical 'acts of mercy' nursing patients, attending to their bodily needs and offering comfort, alongside her own conviction of its power in assuring a 'good death':

it says if you say this prayer, the Divine Mercy chaplet, on the bedside of somebody who is dying He will stand beside that person, not as a just God ... as a merciful God, you know. ... And a lot of my people, a lot of the patients, they don't want to hear about God, and you don't even have to mention this thing. So I just silently intercede for them as say, 'Well God, you know best' ... But in a few, I think one or two homes, no three actually, who have been Catholics and I came in there and we prayed the Divine Mercy. Oh, I was so moved by it. We prayed the Divine Mercy and they ... allowed me to explain a bit more about it. And we prayed it together and they had just called the priest, themselves called the priest to come and, because she died just as I was coming.⁹

For Martha there is a palpable sense of the need for such devotional prayer for herself ('looking after people physically ... and being there spiritually'). However, a sharp tension is created for her and other Catholic nurses working in a secular medical context in which expressions of faith are tightly quarantined to official chaplains and formal requests by patients. Martha's testimony reveals her belief in the power and intercessory agency available to the female laity, outside sacramental settings such as Penance and Extreme Unction, to minister God's grace and forgiveness to the dying. She draws on the words of Jesus recorded by Faustina: 'Whoever will recite it will receive great mercy at the hour of death... Even if there were a sinner most hardened, if he were to recite this chaplet only once, he would receive grace from My infinite mercy' (*Diary* §687, 282). The holistic nexus that Martha draws between physical care (through her nursing) and 'softening' spiritual succour creates a space for her ministrations outside holy orders.

A premium on lay agency is also present in the account of Bernice, a Mancunian woman in her 70s, who has been praying the chaplet of the Divine Mercy for over twenty years since she first read about it in a Catholic newspaper. It is a prayer she practises regularly and unselfconsciously 'walking to work in the mornings

as the prayers are simple and the rosary beads slipped easily through my fingers inside my coat pocket'.¹⁰ Now approaching later life and experiencing thoughts of mortality and bouts of insomnia, she dedicates her regular 3am sleepless prayers to 'those in need of prayer ... praying for souls in their last agony'. Her conviction of the chaplet's efficacy is enhanced by its role in providing peace and solace to her (non-religious) neighbour in her last hours:

Poor Betty, she was so agitated and I could see fear in her eyes. The family left me alone with her, and although she didn't appear to know me, I just held her hand and whispered the prayers for the dying ... A while after I came home and Bernard [her husband] and I prayed the chaplet of Divine Mercy together – just the other side of the wall from where she was lying. Early next morning her daughter came to tell us that she had died in the early hours - shortly after I had left ... and probably whilst we were praying for her – Betty had become very calm and peaceful and had fallen into sleep from which she did not awake. Her family were convinced that the prayers had taken away her fear.¹¹

Such bedside prayers to facilitate a 'good death' are seen as a way of making incarnate God's mercy in the face of suffering, especially in times of vulnerability, fragility and a deathbed review of one's life. As Martha and Bernice's testimonies show, for devout laywomen who find inspiration in the model of St Faustina, there is the possibility of pastoral ministry and self-ascribed, almost (male) priestly authority in their virtuoso performances of these devotions and *de facto* extreme unction outside a church-based, sacramental setting.

The appeal of the Divine Mercy is not, however, confined to the laity but in the accounts of devotees also seems to appeal across personality types, theological convictions and indeed religious denomination. Father Peter, a young priest of

traditionalist propensities, ministers in a deprived and religiously diverse inner-city parish in North-West England. Peter was introduced to the Divine Mercy in the seminary and his devotion was developed and nurtured by an already-established Faustinian group in the parish to which he was first appointed. He now has charge of a new parish with a very large Polish contingent and he has established a Divine Mercy shrine in the church, instituted 9am novena prayers before a ‘Hyla-inspired’ painting (donated by the Polish chaplaincy in Manchester) and has annexed the Divine Mercy prayers to exposition of the Blessed Sacrament.¹² Similarly, for help in developing her priestly vocation, the Anglican convert and curate Amelia – originally from Ghana but now resident in East London – also draws upon the Divine Mercy chaplet, alongside the Henri Nouwen’s *The Wounded Healer* (1979).¹³ These remnants from her Catholic childhood remain important resources for her spiritual life and now provide theological nourishment for her liberal, inclusive Anglican ministry to a community of comprised of migrants from Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe (Garnett and Harris, 2013b). Required to be *in loco Christi* each Sunday – an image or icon of the Merciful Christ and to enact physically the *Mysterium Paschale* – clergy like Peter and Amelia find within the devotion (and its visual representations) resources for addressing the ill-health, pain and suffering encountered in their professional Christian ministry and communicating to their congregations the peace and transformative possibilities available in Christ and his ‘body on earth’, the Christian community.

Conclusion

In a letter of thanksgiving received in 2006 by the Łagiewnik Sanctuary and written once he had returned home, a Divine Mercy devotee reflected:

This is a unique place on Earth, eyes see better here, ears hear better, the mind comprehends more easily, the heart becomes more sensitive, and the whole human opens himself to Truth, Goodness and Beauty – to God – who is our sole mercy (Sąsiasdek 2007, 148).

Like many pilgrims who identify a sacred location with an intensification of contact with the divine (Coleman and Elsner 1995, 134), this correspondent has tapped into a (pre-existing) narrative that views Kraków (and Faustina's old convent and burial site) as a place of heightened, liminal experience. However, as this chapter has explored in its discussion of Saint Faustina's visionary experiences and the practice of the Divine Mercy devotions by millions of adherents worldwide, for those convinced of its efficacy the cult *itself* heightens the religious senses and makes the heart 'more sensitive'. In its re-articulation and envisioning of the implications of the Incarnation (and a re-appreciation of the visceral, fleshy implications of Christ's Passion), the bodies of the faithful are mobilised into a metaphorical, mimetic relationship with God and Christ. The embodied intercessory strategies of Saint Faustina herself, and those who draw inspiration from her writings as the 'secretary of God's mercy', reveal shifting and sometimes conflicting constructions of gender and a spectrum of representations and rhetorics about femininity, masculinity and 'divinely-inflected' gender categories. This very malleability perhaps explains the appeal of these forms of prayer and its complex, often materialised imagery, to both men and women across the theological spectrum and of varying classes and ethnicity as well as spiritual temperaments (see Hermkens, Jansen and Notermans 2009; Woodhead 2008; Fedele and Knibbe 2013). As a devotion for 'those with hardened hearts', which foregrounds an affective relationality and embodied spirituality, the Divine Mercy re-presents the love, tenderness, strength and forgiveness available in God in a format accessible to men and women often desensitized by the travails and tragedies of the modern age.



Figure 1. Icon of the Divine Mercy by Adolf Hyla, surrounded by *ex votos* and atop the relics of St Faustina within the Łagiewniki convent chapel, Kraków, Poland (Author's photograph).

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NOTES

- ¹ The Cause for the Beatification of Father Sopoćko has now been opened, see http://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/saints/2008/ns_lit_doc_20080928_sopocko_en.html (16 February, 2014).
- ² Personal Communication (via email) with Sister Gregoria ZMBA, Łagiewniki Sanctuary, Kraków, Poland, 29 June 2012.
- ³ In preparation for the canonisation, a John Paul II Centre and separate Sanctuary were built in the Łagiewniki grounds – see <http://www.krakow-info.com/JPII-sanctuary.htm> (16 February, 2014).
- ⁴ http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xii/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_15051956_haurietis-aquas_en.html, paragraph 10 (accessed 16 February, 2014)
- ⁵ *Ibid*, paragraph 12.
- ⁶ Communicated within an oral history interview with Sister Vianeya ZMBM, 21 September 2012, Łagiewniki convent, Kraków (written notes).
- ⁷ Communicated within an oral history interview with Father Thomas, 8 June 2012, Marian Fathers Centre for the Apostolate in West Ealing, London (written notes).
- ⁸ Oral history interview with Mille, 21 September 2012, Łagiewniki Sanctuary, Kraków (written notes).
- ⁹ Oral history interview with Martha, 29 May 2009 (#63–4), Canning Town, London (transcript) and deposited at Bishopsgate Institute, London.

¹⁰ Written personal communication from Bernice, 26 May 2012, Ashton-under-Lyne, UK.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Personal communication with Father Peter, 28 May 2012 (written notes).

¹³ Oral history interview with Amelia, 29 October 2009 (#117), East Ham, London (transcript) and deposited at Bishopsgate Institute, London.